

FIRST NORTH AMERICAN RECORDS OF THE RUFIOUS-TAILED ROBIN (*LUSCINIA SIBILANS*)

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The Rufous-tailed Robin (*Luscinia sibilans*) breeds in Asia from the Altai Mountains and upper Yenisei River east to the Amur River basin, Ussuriland, and Sakhalin and south to Transbaikalia and Manchuria (OSJ 2000). Nearest to Alaska is an isolated population in central eastern Kamchatka in the Trukhinka River valley (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954, Vaurie 1959). The species winters mainly from the Yangtze valley, in southern China, south to Hainan; it is a scarce or uncommon winter visitant in northern Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam (Vaurie 1959, Robson 2000). It migrates primarily over continental Asia and is of only rare and irregular occurrence in Japan, primarily in May along the west coast and on islands of the Sea of Japan (Brazil 1991). In Europe, the Rufous-tailed Robin has been recorded once each in the fall at Fair Isle, Scotland (Shaw 2004), and in early winter at Białystok, Poland (Grygoruk and Tumił 2006). This species has been reported three times from North America, all in Alaska.

The first Alaska sighting of the Rufous-tailed Robin was at Attu Island (52° 55' N 172° 55' E), in the western Aleutian Islands, on 4 June 2000. The bird was found along Gilbert Ridge trail by Heinl, who was leading a birding tour for Attour, Inc. The bird spent much of its time skulking in rock crevices and under snow banks at the base of the ridge but periodically emerged to forage on the open ground and matted vegetation adjacent to the trail. Photos and video of this bird by Jan Knott (Figure 1) and Diantha Knott (on file, University of Alaska Museum of the North [UAM]) were judged by Gibson et al. (2003), Robbins et al. (2003), and Banks et al. (2004) to be inadequate to substantiate the identification.

The first Rufous-tailed Robin well substantiated in Alaska was discovered and collected exactly eight years later, on 4 June 2008, at Attu by Sonneborn and Jack J. Withrow while conducting bird studies for UAM. The bird (Figure 2) was found in a deep canyon in West Massacre Valley, where it occupied willows approximately 50 cm tall growing among empty 55-gallon fuel drums left from World War II. The specimen was deposited at UAM, where the identification was corroborated by Daniel D. Gibson, who prepared the specimen (UAM 24600) as a study skin and partial skeleton plus frozen tissues, stomach contents, and lower digestive tract for disease screening. The specimen was a female, in its second year on the basis of retained buff tips of the greater wing coverts.

On the evening of 8 June 2008, another Rufous-tailed Robin was discovered and identified at St. Paul Island (57° 10' N, 170° 15' W), Pribilof Islands, by DeCicco, who was conducting bird studies for the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. The bird remained through 9 June, frequenting rock outcroppings on Hutchinson Hill at Northeast Point, where it was seen by a number of people associated with several birding tours. This occurrence was well documented by photographs (Figures 3 and 4) obtained by Gregory L. Thomson (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) and Cameron D. Cox (St. Paul Island Tours); additional photographs were taken by George Armistead (Field Guides Birding Tours, Inc.) and Gary H. Rosenberg (WINGS Birding Tours, Inc.) on 9 June. The photographs revealed that, on the basis of the buff tips to the greater coverts, this individual was also in its second year (Figure 3).

The behavior of these three birds was similar. All tended to skulk behind and under any objects available such as large rocks or snow banks. The bird on Attu in

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Figure 1. Rufous-tailed Robin at Attu Island 4 June 2000. Note the long pink legs, brown upperparts with contrasting rufous tail and upper tail coverts, generally whitish underparts, and pale eye ring and supraloral area. Although the scaly pattern on the underparts is not obvious in these photos, the grayish markings that are visible (malar stripes, markings across the upper chest, and streaked appearance on the sides of the chest) are all formed by the grayish tips of those feathers.

Photos by Jan Knott

2000 remained under one rock for approximately 20 minutes and also hid under snow banks, moving briefly in and out of sight. On a number of occasions this same behavior resulted in the bird on St. Paul being difficult to flush from an area where it had ample shelter. The bird on Attu in 2008 was likewise very furtive, being difficult to flush and disappearing into willow tangles. On the ground these birds commonly cocked the tail to approximately 75° over the back, resulting in a very distinct posture. The birds bobbed and quivered the tail when they paused between flights or runs: the tail was cocked at a high angle, then rapidly flicked up and down three to five times, then quivered at a shallow angle on a horizontal plane. This tail movement was not sustained but occurred in short bursts as the birds moved around. No vocalizations were heard from any of them.



Figure 2. Rufous-tailed Robin specimen (UAM 24600) collected at Attu Island on 4 June 2008. Note the brown upperparts with contrasting rufous tail, generally whitish underparts, and obvious pattern of brownish gray scales on the throat, breast and flanks.

Photos by Daniel D. Gibson

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Figure 3. Rufous-tailed Robin at St. Paul Island on 9 June 2008. Note the brown upperparts with contrasting rufous tail, generally whitish underparts, and pattern of brownish gray scales on the flanks. The dusky malar stripes are also formed by the grayish tips to those feathers. The bird also exhibits a whitish eye ring with a duller supraloral stripe. The pale tips to the inner greater secondary feathers identify this bird as in its second year.

Photo by Cameron Cox



Figure 4. Rufous-tailed Robin at St. Paul Island on 9 June 2008. Here the tail appears brighter rufous and more contrasting with the brownish upperparts than in Figure 3, likely a result of the photographic exposure.

Photo by Gary Rosenberg

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The small size, round body shape, proportionally short-tailed and long-legged appearance, and behavior (skulking and tail bobbing) identified the three birds as small thrushes or chats in the palearctic genus *Luscinia*, of which there are 11 species (Monroe and Sibley 1993). The Rufous-tailed Robin is distinctive as the only small *Luscinia* featuring a combination of brown upperparts with a contrasting rufous tail (Figures 1 and 4), white breast, belly, and undertail coverts, and an obvious pattern of brownish gray scales on the underparts (Figures 2 and 3; see MacKinnon and Philipps 2000, Robson 2000). These characters were evident on all the Alaska birds, and each was marked with a pale buff eye ring and dull buff supraloral area between the eye and the bill (Figures 1 and 3).

Other species of *Luscinia* are either much larger (e.g., the nightingales *L. megarhynchos* and *L. luscinia*) or distinctively marked. Females of five species (the Siberian Blue Robin, *L. cyane*, Indian Blue Robin, *L. brunnea*, Blackthroat, *L. obscura*, Firethroat, *L. pectardens*, and Rufous-headed Robin, *L. ruficeps*) are most similar to the Rufous-tailed Robin in their shape and obscure markings. All, however, have some degree of buff or olive coloration on the underparts, which is generally lacking in the Rufous-tailed Robin. Female Siberian Blue and Rufous-headed robins have scaly patterns on the underparts but also have an olive-brown dorsum and buff throat and chest (Siberian Blue Robin) or an olive-tinged breast and flanks (Rufous-headed Robin). Females of the Blackthroat also exhibit a rufous tail ("rufescent-tinged undertail-coverts, warm-tinged brown tail"; Robson 2000 but, in addition to buff underparts, have darkish (rather than pink) legs and lack a scaly pattern on the underparts.

Given the vigorous birding coverage of Attu and of the Bering Sea islands of St. Paul and St. Lawrence, these three sightings of the Rufous-tailed Robin represent the detection of yet another Asiatic species of only extralimital occurrence in western Alaska, like so many other birds recorded at those localities over the years. The fact that all three sightings in Alaska fell within a five-day window suggests a consistent timing of migration through areas exposing this species to weather systems able to blow it off course.

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